

ALTERNATE LIVES



by Shirley Powell

ALTERNATE LIVES

by Shirley Powell

THE POET'S PRESS
Pittsburgh, PA

Copyright 1990 by Shirley Powell
All Rights Reserved

Second edition, 2020
Revised edition,
Reset in Palatino type.

Poems in this volume have previously
appeared in *Oxalis*, *Alphabeat Soup*
Echoe and *Home Planet News*.

Montage illustrations
by Mildred Barker

This is the 288th publication of
THE POET'S PRESS
2209 Murray Avenue #3
Pittsburgh, PA 15217-2338

www.poetspress.org

CONTENTS

7	Moon Dream
8	Woman Called Rock
10	They Cannot See Me
12	For Snow
13	Sea Song
15	They Call Me
16	Lived in a Tree
18	From the Woods Series
19	In Woods
21	Edge
23	With Sheep
25	White Horse
26	Going After Cows
28	Woods, Ruth Woods
31	Receptacle
32	The Hurts
34	Doyle Point
36	Show Time
38	Keeping Ahead
40	Boxes
42	I'm Telling You
43	Shark
44	If Ever
47	Desensitized
49	Thirty Pieces
50	The Next Death
52	The Back Bedroom
54	Imago
56	Grammarian's Poem

ALTERNATE LIVES

For Harold F. Powell
In Memoriam

MOON DREAM

Sparrows talk from a cedar tree
asking the moon to come down

Sky tunnels black
and the moon
a giant cat's eye
winks

Tiny legs and feet leap out
of the moon's closed
brightness

They dance and chirp on my roof
like sparrows
till light



WOMAN CALLED ROCK

She wanted that strange rainbow rib
cut eons ago by long vanished sea
and now bearing up the starved trees

She spoke to the great arch that first day
asked it if this was the place
knowing it was had to be

The others stood back as she spoke

What were they thinking?

Whatever it was they
followed under the rock
fashioned their stone rooms

made windows
though she made none

Only a door

Below a smooth cliff led
into abyss

Let the enemy come
she said Nobody knew
what she meant they had seen
no enemy

She prayed to the great rainbow
 rock roof
and they let her

Some say she was the maker of
new creatures on the hard surfaces

Her body's embedded there too
Her people gone

They understood
what she would become

Woman called Rock



THEY CANNOT SEE ME

Leave them behind walk
under forsythia dig down
with moles and bulbs

with earthworms and small snakes
striped with their stories

So much room!
I cannot imagine daylight
forget the sun's every day ravishing

how small I become
inconsequential even happy

I come out only with night things
to bawl for moon kisses
to examine stars

to tongue blood between my teeth

As hair grows
they can not see me
thinking me a crazed beast
a link gladly forgotten

Now even the stars are not
reference points
Earth
our only mother
points me true

I swim in moist dirt
wear it under my armpits
lie in it for my rest

Many tunnels
much air
tiny nuggets to eat

I couple with whatever comes
No more impossible dreams

It is all dreaming

I am really gone this time
They cannot see me

FOR SNOW

I lived in snow, a snow house
while the white sky peeled
and slipped down
gathered by trees and the glad ground.

and I lived in snow
wore it for hats heaped it over the hours
ate it as it turned to nothing
under my tongue

It was no misfortune living in snow
sodden and chill
watching it fall and grow
fall and grow

I chewed bark of an old sycamore
tough leftover fern
dried blueberries hard on their canes
from the summer
the few hickory nuts squirrels missed

Living in snow sledding
the hills building ethereal castles
I animated snowwoman
carrying my dead white burden
everywhere

Of course I was frozen alive
to be found in somebody's April
lying in a flooded field crying
for snow



SEA SONG

I lived on the beach
as soon as I saw
the tumbled ocean the whitened shells.

My eyes and mouth were sand
my familiars laughing gulls sand pipers.

As wind combed and recombined the dunes
I waded far out to hunt hermits
in low tide discover periwinkles on kelpy rocks.

It was no bother to live on the beach
damp cold sand and storms no trouble.

It was like swimming in my own
comfortable blood finding myself so enlarged
so unaccountable small.

The gulls and I studied each other
I gentled the horseshoes back to water
hoping for them

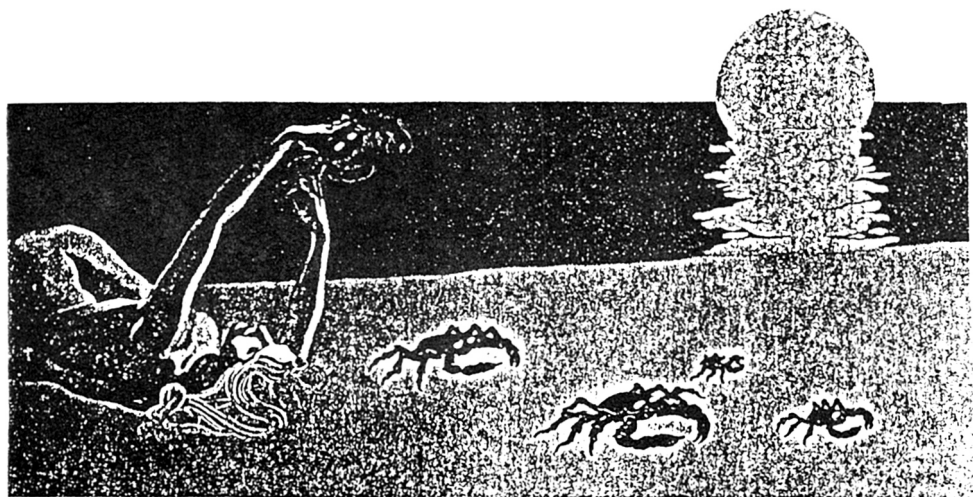
wore necklaces of shark's eggs
ate mussels and clams
my house scallop shells and
bleached driftwood

every day full of salt
and surf sounds. Some nights the moon
walked on the water.

I followed my courage into the storms

till one in a gigantic froth
took me back
and after many washings
left me on another beach —

not a bad death considering



THEY CALL ME

Mollusks are my meal
they all give up
soft insides at my prying

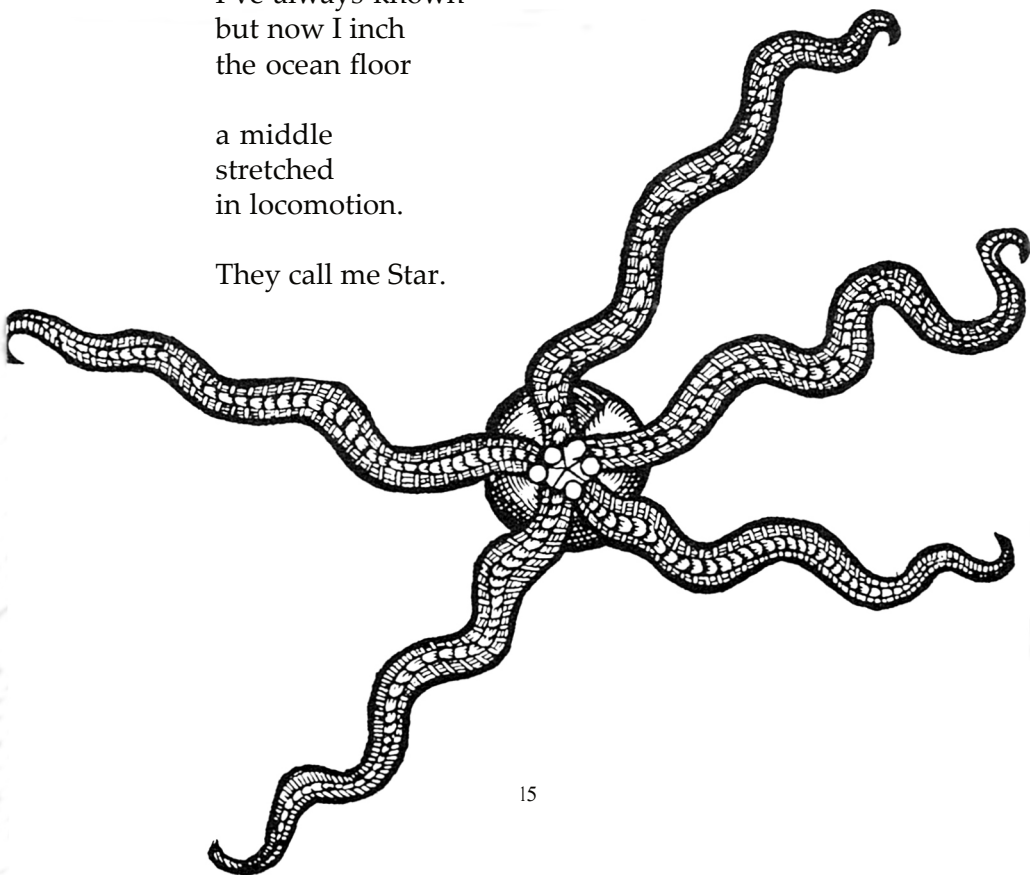
It's death to them

Mussels clams I
suck into my center
thick and strong
some parts renewable
Life is the grip
holding against surges above

I know where
the lost place is
I've always known
but now I inch
the ocean floor

a middle
stretched
in locomotion.

They call me Star.



LIVED IN A TREE

I lived in a tree a tall hemlock
I slept tickled with soft needles

in a hemlock grove anchored
above a wide fall of water

where deer slept close to a swampy retreat

I learned climbing from tree
to tree slower than squirrels
high as nests encountering
snakes looking with them for eggs

No wonder after days in the
tree's crown
I thought I could fly

It was easy living in my tree
hard bark on my cheek
ants inquiring about my fingers

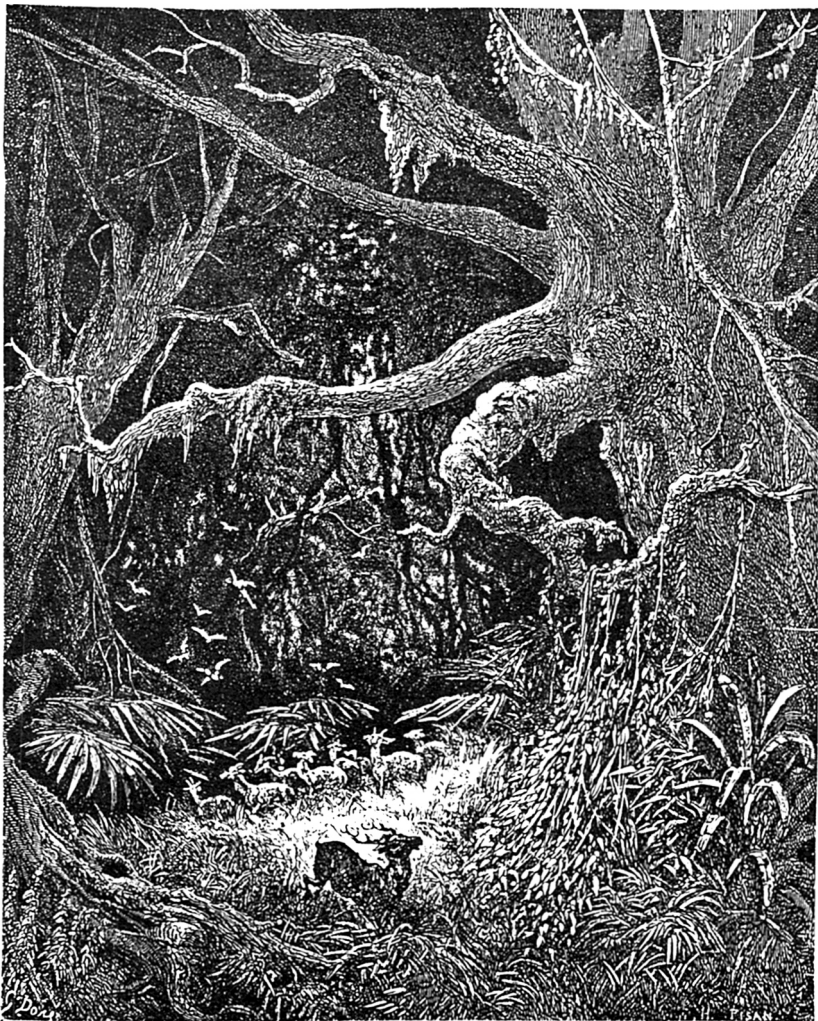
I sucked them from the backs
of my hands ate morels
drank rain pools found berries
went hungry

Deer rubbed their antlers on my hemlock
owls glided by clutching blood in their beaks

I came to my end
reclining among branches

leaving my satisfied skeleton
wherever scavengers let fall
the bits of me

under evergreen trees



FROM THE WOODS SERIES

and in the north
skyful of light
aurora almost music

conifers in rain
osprey hunting
in fragrant air

death-dreaming

whole hours I
forget
hawk climbing is more real

aurora descending
in chords
wolf sings

even the wind
hangs
waiting

from a rock ledge
a flattened cougar
stares

air between us
shakes out a mist
hawk shears off

aurora is gone
my fire lets me see
my hand tremble

IN WOODS

Lived in woods
sang poems to
hold off the lonelies

when stars blinked out and
barred owls talked of my ending

Woods greened and made more
in forever shadow

I blinking in meadows afraid
of innocent branches
a leaf-pile
learned the washing of brooks
on hard feet

introduced to the night
when
moons came to my evenings

Spiders taught me their webs
and at last the old oaks
brought me religion

I
probably died sometime
wrapped in fecund soil and used-up leaves

I never noticed the death
here in woods
moving closer
to towns

Towns!
you think you have won
but
We take you back
we take you back



EDGE

At the edge patrolled by
thunder that smokes by on
wide tracks
tracks splitting the green
the willow shade and browse,
we're kept from creek
its coolest pools
its somewhere wander, too.

Saw others lying
in the hard path where
crows come down to tear and
swallow.

How the insides roll out red
and bodies swell to bursting
or till smashed smooth to
stink and trace of hair.

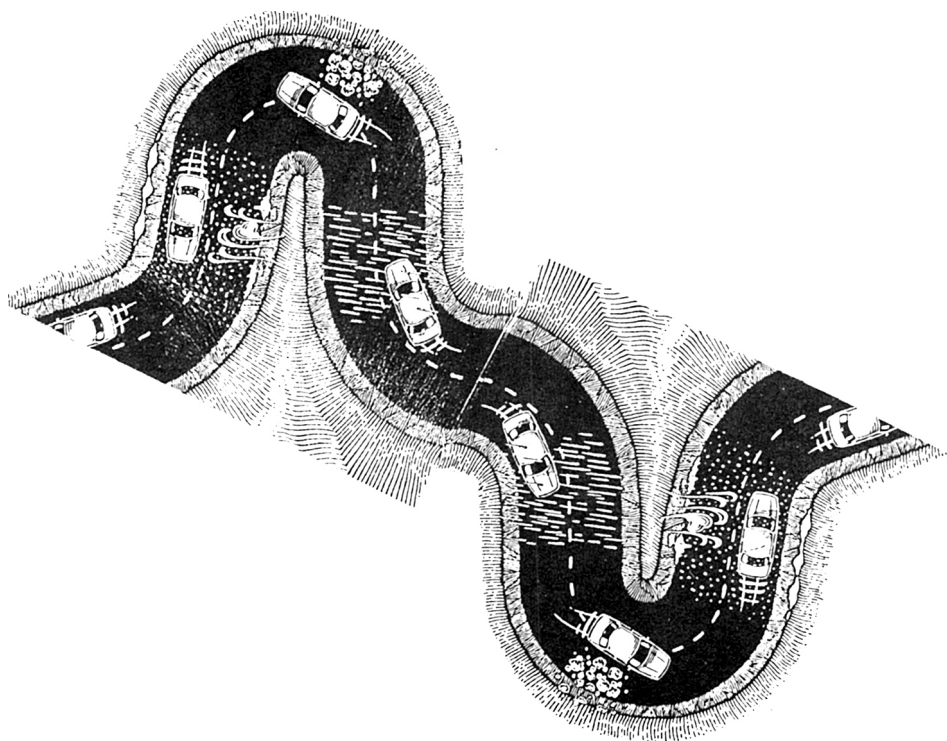
I crossed once with
three others.
The great lights came and came as
we lunged down to easy woods again.

I'm looking for
an endless place
without hard tracks—

I think the earth
remembers where it is
and will tell us
a night when the moon is red.

There are so many reasons here
to go away.

Where is away?



WITH SHEEP

I'm among sheep on mountain slopes
soon as snow draws back.

Today I found a stone
with jasper in it

The dogs and I
had fiddle music in
the afternoon
before the bloody part docking
lamb's tails

passing down to sheep sheds
by night's fall

I find the house already warmed
by thick peat fire
stew and new bread waiting

Silly Mary sliced her husband's arm again.

Sheep talk inside their wood walls
and we in stone.

"I see the moon out there,"
is all that I can think to say.

They don't laugh
the family thinks
time among the sheep
has made me an oddity
as if I bring the mountain
to them.

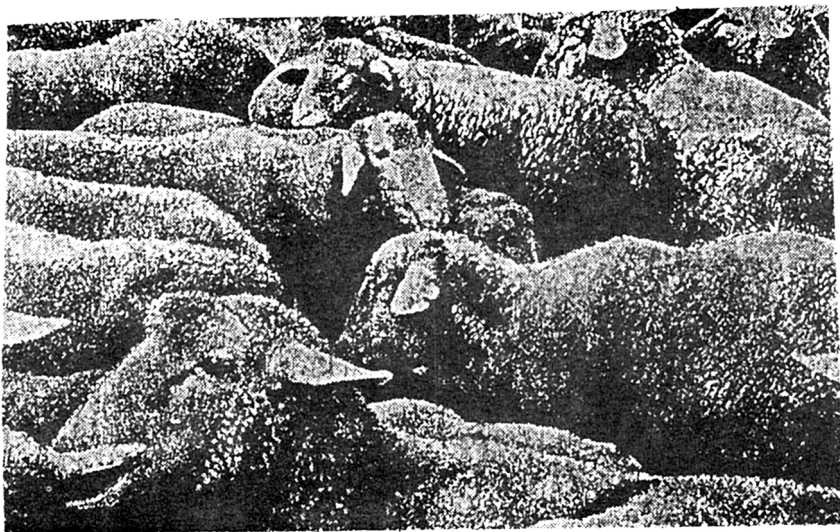
That scares them since
the avalanche

"Who'll go up tomorrow?"
Dad says, but they all know.
"You've the gift for sheep,"
he always says.

Maybe I do.
The dogs and I have no
dye markings on our backs
but we know whose we are.

In the morning after eggs and tea
I bow the fiddle so
the sheep will know we're going.

The family waves us into
mist before returning
home.



WHITE HORSE

stands hoof high
in shadowed morning pond

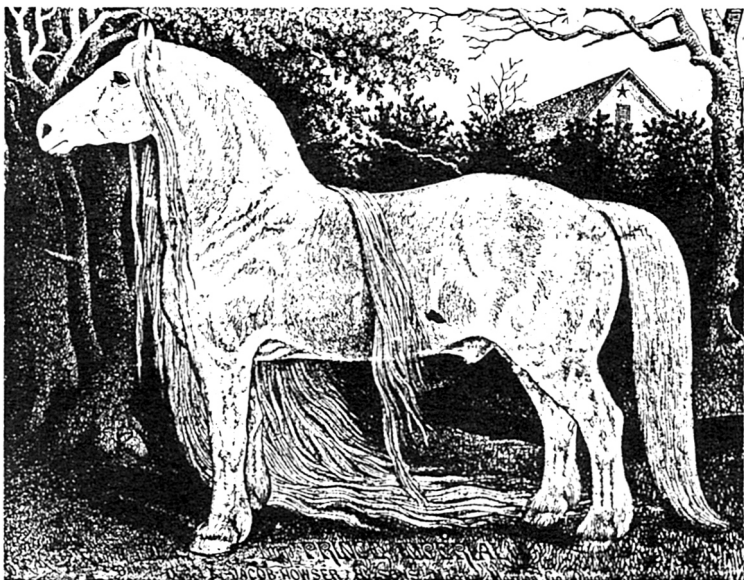
great willow shatters sunlig
ht on his back

Hardbitten hills lean back
and blur

The wind makes him
arch his neck and swim
the pond

He lives far down in
his life

every moment
fresh surprise



GOING AFTER COWS

Granddad led the way
to gray boulder
(duck landing) to cross the branch
and then uphill

The bellwether
came even before
he slipped the halter
on her neck

She followed
down through daisies
and wild carrot
to pig sties and
to barns

Animals always did
what Granddad wanted.

Even the sick hen lay still
while he reached inside her
with a spoon to take her egg
"I thought it mighta
broke in there," he told me.

He cut off the heads of cockerels
every week at an old tree stump
He'd turn them free to flop
The other chickens watched but
didn't run away

When he went after cows
the cows came as if
he had holy wafers
in his dusty pockets

as if he knew the real
names of those cows
their long-ago desires



WOODS, RUTH WOODS

Every day Rafe left Ruth
in the woods that was his name
Woods and he called her by it
Ruth Ruth Woods

In the wind they moaned those
frigging pine trees and
oaks scraped each other

A house down the lane had
children in it little white girls came
to call Ruth made them cookies
taught them songs

brushed that long blonde hair
no wonder Indians lifted scalps
that hair was nice

Rafe wouldn't take her into town he
left her there till after dark and hoot owls
made her light up
all the rooms

He was making money hauling trash
Get me a new truck he would say
Look how we live here
Ruth complained it ain't no life

What's wrong with it,
Ruth, Ruth Woods?
You lucky you got a man
She'd shut up
before Rafe got ugly

Kept her house pure clean
so they couldn't talk about
no shiftless darkies

and then the peddler came
sold her a knife she didn't want
then told her she could
keep it for nothing and
taught her some new tunes
a dance step too

brought her a gold ring
she had to hide
kept coming back and told her
she should
meet him in town

When Rafe found out
he took the knife to her
and she ran out into
the so black woods

Ruth! Ruth Woods! he
called to her but
she was gone

Come Saturday the neighbors
went a-hunting for her among
the pines and oaks the sleepy owls

But she was gone
for good like
somebody scooped her up
and took her down to Tupelo

The white girls missed
those cookies and those songs
At night they thought
they heard the pine trees singing
Ruth Ruth Woods



RECEPTACLE

He grew up black and mighty.
Willie was his name.
He came loose from Harlem
among whites at Cooper Union.

Didn't like the 70s revolution
women wanted.
He said, "The pole is mightier
than the hole."

It was his best line.

He had no wife, no
permanent receptacle —

not then.

THE HURTS

He walked you home
a hundred nights
sat by the radiator
watching you undress
when you didn't know
kept you in steaks
and roses buried
your cats cleaned out
your plumbing

was somebody daily
you would've missed

He came down to the limo
with you after you leaned
over your husband's
casket held
the car door open

waited a seemly interval before
bringing you the travel literature
suggesting the trip after
we you know
Just yes or no he said

You said you couldn't
get away but thanks

You got away after
the house sold
He could've bought it
if he'd known

Several people saw you off
You looked fussed like you
hadn't slept
You said to him I'll miss you
and he answered *it*
didn't have to be
this way

Then the greatest hurt
You looked puzzled

DOYLE POINT

I've lived in the Doyle Point Cemetery
14 years
and never seen so much as a sheet
in the air after midnight.

I take turns sleeping in grassy places
above or between graves not sunken
don't like them sunken.

Pines keep me company
in spring shrubs flower
for squirrels and robins
and for me.

The stones wait out the storms
but I can use the toolshed if
I want and the little stove in there
just for clipping grass
and warding off vandals bad boys
from the village.

When I go down to the village
people look the other way
some of them are coming up
where I live one day too.

But I don't gloat.

I visit the new graves
before the flowers wilt
see them at their best and
don't embarrass residents
like I did when they were living.

It's up to me to throw the rotting flowers
down the slope
and trim around the stones
so I know them
same as you know your own street.

Wonder what they'll write
on my stone.
Some lie likely.
Doesn't matter.

I've got the place picked out though,
beside that crabapple.
It knows how to flower
how to live

SHOW TIME

After the last show
comes the fun time
Keep ahead of those
barrels and brooms!

Down the aisles up
the aisles down
Most of them will turn
you in with leftover
popcorn

You're revving your silent
engine in the balcony
Time it right
bent over row by row
to the john before

they know it.

It's creepy after
but you can sleep in the seats ok
and leave by the fire exit
in the morning

You can't do this every night
It's hard to get \$7
but in the old theaters you might
find a back entrance to the stage.

You can live there
for weeks.

Once I made a home
inside an air vent above a john.

You can imagine
it wasn't perfect
But it was ok till the rat bite

Candy machines
and computer games
sodas popcorn first run shows
even a place to wash your hands

I mean how much do you need
in one life?

Well I could write a book
but why should I tell you
everything?

KEEPING AHEAD

Once on 32nd Street
I found nickels
on pavement and begged
my eyes moist palms up

coins enough for a seat
at a counter on 7th Avenue
coffee and toast

a little box of
cereal

Put much thinking into racing forms
in case the occasion arose
where there was money
to invest

Kept moving
so the bad boys wouldn't burn me

Learned asleep walking
talked to myself in parks
shook my fists shouted
cursed the gangs
not afraid of me

It all got to be fear
not enough food
too many sores
not enough toilets
too many dopers

Keep moving
the law said

Once a child gave me chocolates
they had me hoping
and not lost.

I read street signs again
32nd and 7th
found the counter
Do you have money? they said
gave me coffee and soup
for my coins invisible this time
just till I get my check

BOXES

On the street

the dog stayed with me
computer box big enough for a dog's bed

cold nights

Refrigerator box for me and my
computer dog

fitting name refrigerator box

And a blanket. I dreamed a blanket
and one day

Had a blanket.
Blanket and computer dog warmed me

Dreamed of Mother Teresa.

Tried to help street people
gave them redeemable bottles
a sweater I didn't like

They took them but some sneered
Who do you think you are
Mother Teresa? one said
that one with the crooked mouth

I didn't think I was
but it gave me something to do.

It's needful to have
a task

otherwise your mind
will blow down the street
after that old refrigerator box

will leave you like that
computer dog

What I need now's
a task and
another big box

I'M TELLING YOU

a drink is nothing.
Wine with dinner.
(salad for my health)
Vodka with some bitter lemon
(I have a glass of milk first
for my stomach's sake)

A few blackouts -hardly
any, At least I'm home
nobody laughs.

A rule I live by:
no drinks till after 10 am and
I work all day
with only a bullshot in the morning
a wine cooler maybe in the

afternoon. It's getting close to
merriment by then. And I can wait,
I keep control.

If my son is coming over
Saturday I wait till
he leaves. Don't want him
nosing in the trash or thinking
he smells something.

He always smells it
anyway
I don't know how

Care for a little drink?
a drink is nothing

SHARK

I'm warning you
this one is my table.
Baby that's ok
I'll give you the break.

When you miss the pocket
watch me work.
You gotta think
geometry
and flip that cue just right.

Easy now
the eight ball walks and drops.

Another game?
Oh, Baby, with a shark?
You better swim
in another pool.

IF EVER

I'll call you
if ever I'm in town

I will.

Meantime
try the creek.
There's a new pond close
made by beaver

Saw 15 of them last night

Make a noise coming.
They can get away fast
We'll have a chat by
the flat rock

Have you ever seen a moonbow?
You see one on the flat rock
special nights

It's nice to know a human
a real human
and
if I'm in town
I'll even chance the phone booth
to call you

It's better here though
You can understand

My features weren't so harsh then
and I believe in saving
a friend's feelings

The pond is just right
slimy underneath
muddy water silky
on my flaking skin

Yes, it's too bad it came to this
and as you say
it could have been all those
days in Florida
getting cozy with the alligators.

But nobody really knows
and that was fun, how they
used to roll over for me
and hiss

I'm telling you they've got a way
with them.

And I'll tell you something else.

From time to time
I may take a duck
those piston legs so
irresistible

But I never bother beaver
even tender little ones
and that's the truth

I'll have to migrate in the fall

and that means traveling nights
from water to water

If I had known about the transformati
on I wouldn't have left Florida
but anyway
I'm glad to know you
understand
and I won't ask again
for you to try it

There's some danger anyway
I didn't show you
the scars

Come if you can
If not
when I pass through town
— remember my voice will sound
A little different —

I'll call

I promise

DESENSITIZED

I don't know why they killed her.
They could have ripped
away her purse without the rest.

A doctor told me I need
therapy to tell the story
many times until I am
desensitized.

He didn't use that word.

She was ordinary even plain
had a nice voice though
sang in a chorus

I'd have a hot meal ready when
she came home from work.

She never married. I have other daughters
and grandkids I don't see much

One night on her way
home they jumped her

I think about how
I'd kill those boys
dragging out their screams

I mustn't think about that
but I do

On streets I stare
at eyes that look away.
To one boy I said,
"Why did you kill her?"
And he ran.

That was very wise of him



THIRTY PIECES

Thirty pieces, one for every year
delivered him.

He only healed the ear
that Peter smote.

After the reward was given
and the one who took it hanged
the thirty pieces were
rendered unto Caesar.

They still exist

Unlike the True Cross
or the Robe
hard money lasts

THE NEXT DEATH

The next death was almost
her own
so close she felt married
to morbidity

Everyone said she
ought to shake it loose
and she knew she
should

but she could read death
on faces
knew it was coming
for this one or that

until she saw
she'd have to
stop herself from
knowing

It had been hard to keep
sane so many years
to try to make some sense
of things to walk
his way

She folded his blanket
over her arm
watching him
talking to a birdhouse
he'd built

The two of them
had formed so many
children
without meaning to
so many obligations
that his leaving wouldn't
cancel.

She lay the blanket
on his bed and sat down.

She was tired.

THE BACK BEDROOM

The boy clutches his collie pup
climbs the stairs to
the back bedroom

Dreams ride here
some too dark
for the living

Can he catch death
like measles
sleeping here?

The pup squirms loose
runs down to light
the easy voices below

The boy waits on the stairs
trying not to cry
not to remember

At a touch
light springs up
to comfort

"Here, Buster!" he calls
Will the dog come
does the dog fear him

now that he's next
to the yawning deep
of beckoning?

There is no softness

in this room
though his brother's bed
is gone is gone
is gone
an echoing sends the boy
rushing downstairs
into a well of warmth

"Buster wouldn't come,"
he tells the watching
adult faces

IMAGO

After he died she saw him
running for a train

You're still alive
she shouted but
he didn't hear

He wore a tan uniform
Soldiers chased him but
the train slowed for him

and he leaped on board
rushing through
empty cars

But they got on too
followed him
to the end

where he leaned over
the railing
watching escaping tracks

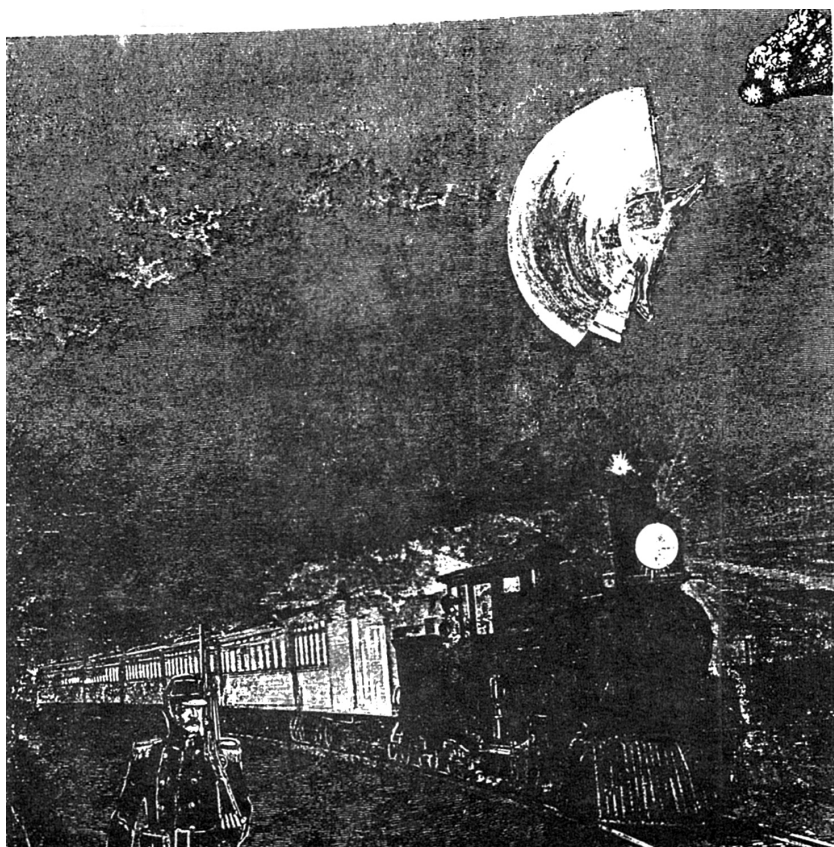
They raised their
rifles and he turned
smiling

He wavered and she thought
he fell
instead a huge

imago took his place
unfolded shimmering wings
became the air

beyond the train
flying in spurts of sheen
out of the picture

After that she
never saw him.



GRAMMARIAN'S POEM

Buckminster Fuller said,
"I seem to be a verb."

That made me think.
My granddad was a genuine article,
my cousin Jill an adjective
modifying every
person, place or thing.

The Joneses we keep up with
must be prepositions:
They have so many objects.

And politicians?
They'd be pronouns,
saying they stand for
something of substance
till after the election.

As for me, I'd like to be
a conjunction,
joining all the lost parts
until my life's sentence
has more meaning.